

POSSIBILITY OR PROBLEM? – ART AND WORSHIP: FIRST STEPS TO INCREASING FORMS OF WORSHIP IN GATHERED WORSHIP SERVICES

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Introduction

The use of music in the gathered worship services of evangelical Christians is self-evident. One can easily observe the predominant use of music in the worship services of most evangelical denominations. The two main actions in the worship service are congregational singing (music) and preaching (speech). What about other forms of art or forms of worship? Could these forms have a regular place within the service order? Visual: forms such as photographs, paintings, sculpture, print, architecture, textiles, mosaics, film, graphic design, and digital art (to name a few). Musical: vocal, instrumental, and environmental sound art (again, to name a few). Speech-related forms such as spoken word, recitation, and reading. Forms involving bodily movement and expression include dance, gesture, and theatre. Within many of the above forms, one can recognize the placement of silence and stillness that complements and assists in the organization and delivery of the worship service and can be a form of worship itself. Within the above examples, one needs to consider if the action is presented to the congregation or whether the congregation performs it and participates in it. How should we think about such forms? How much should we offer in our worship services beyond congregational singing?

This article seeks to encourage an increase in the arts in Christian worship by placing the discussion in the context of addressing some of the challenges many churches face in adding art forms, which may require a change in worship forms beyond solely congregational worship music in the worship service. Of importance as well is the methodology of placing art forms within the worship service order. The starting point will be to define the context of the discussion. What are we attempting to do when we meet together in worship?

The Purpose of the Gathered Congregation

To increase the use of other art forms or forms of worship in Christian worship services, it is vital to know what worship leaders intend to do. What is the purpose of the gathered community in the worship service? What do worship leaders desire to see accomplished? They do not wish to ignore the work of God in his followers. It is not this author's intention to undermine or ignore the Holy Spirit's role in the lives of people who gather for worship. The discussion of this

paper is to explore the growth and development of our practice of worship. One problem is the way leaders talk about what they are doing.

When answering the question of what leaders are intending to do in the gathered worship service, the answer most often provided, while not incorrect, is not well defined: worship. A worship leader will frequently invite the congregation to stand and worship. The event immediately following is congregational singing. Once all the songs are sung, the congregation is invited to be seated with a phrase like, “Thank you for worshipping with us.” Worship is equated with congregational singing. If someone asked, “How was the worship this morning?” the answer would most often reference the congregational singing portion of the worship service and the instrumentalists and singers who led it.

There are at least two items that will assist the plan to consider the addition of new forms to the worship service. One is a comprehensive definition of worship. The second is using more descriptive terminology of what is taking place in a worship service. In seeking to increase the use of different forms or the creative arts, leaders need to ask what do they want *the congregation to do*? What will they help the worshipping congregation accomplish?

The Purpose of Worship

A comprehensive definition going beyond the one-word description of “music” will aid in increasing the use of other forms of the arts in the actions of Christian worship. While there are many and good definitions of worship, one example demonstrates several characteristics of a thorough definition. The words of the former Bishop of Canterbury, William Temple, allow leaders to pause to consider what they hope to experience in Christian worship.

“Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination with the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God – all gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable.”¹

Note the action words in this definition: to quicken, to feed, to purge, to open, and to devote. Worship is defined as entailing all these actions and if worship characterized all these things, how much broader the worship experience of believers would be. Observe how the entire person is addressed: the conscience, the

¹ William Temple>Quote>Quotable Quotes,” Goodreads, accessed October 16, 2025, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1543945-worship-is-the-submission-of-all-of-our-nature-to>

mind, the imagination, the heart, and the will. Note the specificity of the terms in addressing the parts of a person that need to be submitted to God. See the attributes of God that are the source of the congregation's ability to worship: his holiness, his truth, his beauty, his love, and his purpose. God deals with humankind from who he is, his attributes. Christians worship *this* God.

And lastly, notice the content of worship and the direction of worship: the holiness *of God*, the truth *of God*, the beauty *of God*, the love *of God*, and the purpose *of God*. Worship before God is not to earn his attention but is sourced to us and received by God from who he is. Bracketing the definition are submission and adoration relating to the posture and emotion of coming before God. Submission connotes that worshippers come to bend the knee before the God they worship. Adoration is the emotional commitment to God and a volitional posture before God. Temple's words provide a large concept and a comprehensive description of Christian worship. They inform the worship service planner of the goal and aspiration of the direction and intent of the worship service.

Current practice in evangelical churches is to have a worship leader, accompanied by a worship team, invite the congregation to stand and "worship." No other adjectives or verbs are used to describe what they hope to occur in the gathered service. What will inform the musicians who are helping with the church service and assist them to better serve and lead the congregation? What will provide continuing education for the congregation to help them grow and develop as worshippers? Enlarging the vocabulary beyond "worship" will equip service planners and leaders to deepen the practice of leading the congregation. Ultimately, the congregation will learn through practice and be informed by the increase in forms of worship.

Temple's definition, although thorough and helpful in describing the effective aspect of worship, does not speak specifically to some of the actions of worship typically associated with the act of worship. Increasing the use of the arts in the worship service through forms of worship, one must answer questions such as "Where will they be placed in the service?" and "What will they mean?" Consequently, other terms need to be considered to broaden the scope of the use of the arts in worship, and the vocabulary of believers when discussing them. Terms used to describe normal human activities are ones true for all humans and include "[s]eeing, listening, touching, gesturing, smelling, imagining, speaking, singing."² Note that these terms are actions of life in general, not referring specifically to a worship service, nor negating their use as such.

² John D. Witvliet, *The Worship-How Can Art Serve the Corporate Worship of the Church?* in *For the Beauty of the Church*, ed. W. David O. Taylor (Baker Books, 2010), 55.

Words describing the actions of worship include: “praising, lamenting, confessing, thanking, being convicted, being inspired, being comforted.”³ Other vocabulary describing the actions of worship are: “assemble, praise, exhort, present offerings, intercede, share the Lord’s Table, kneel, bow, testify, surrender, declare our faith, listen, and disperse the assembly in order to serve.”⁴

Both lists enlarge the terminology leaders can use to assist them when thinking about what art forms can and cannot do. As with most art forms, some will be better able to function in helping the worshipper praise and other forms will be better able to help the worshipper confess. The art form used in worship services has been most often left to music. Music *can* carry a large weight of the responsibility in assisting the worshipper to submit and adore God, but often music can be overburdened with this task because it is left alone to handle this task. Cherry cautions worship leaders “to make the claim that worship services *need* music overreaches...”⁵ The fact that leaders find it difficult to imagine a worship service without music demonstrates the primary role music has in evangelical church worship services.

Music is present not only because it is prominent. Music is present because it has a role to play. Cherry describes music’s role as follows: “assisting the worshiping community in proclaiming and celebrating the story of God.” One of the helpful guidelines Cherry provides is to define music’s purpose in its role and its functions. She states that music has one role and many functions. It is not the intent here to proceed in stating, describing, and commenting on the functions Cherry introduces. What is under consideration here is the idea that if music has one role and multiple functions, it may be helpful to consider the role of various art forms in a similar way. To tell the story of God, referencing the power and holistic description in Temple’s definition of worship and including an increased vocabulary of the actions of worship, leaders may find that the path to increasing the use of more art forms is smoother than first imagined.

Role and function are useful categories for discussing the increased use of art forms. When introducing something new in church service, leaders are often asked a simple question: “Why?” Assigning all forms of worship and forms of art to one role answers the question and assists the service planner/leader to stay on course. The inclusion of any action in worship needs to be intentional and purposeful. The role of telling the story of God assists in considering and shaping the forms of worship to a proper end. Everything planned in a worship service is to help the worshipper tell and recount the story of God.

³ Witvliet, *How Can Art Serve*, 55.

⁴ Constance Cherry, *The Music Architect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 42.

⁵ Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 40.

The Programmatic Challenges

There are challenges as leaders seek to include new forms of worship in church services. What may be a more difficult situation to navigate is introducing a form of worship that is more common in a denomination that is not our own. One challenge is to have a comprehensive definition of worship. As well, the addition of more verbs to describe the actions of worship will be new to some. If so, their use will take time to become comfortable with the church leadership and the congregation. Other challenges are worth noting briefly.

In many, if not most, evangelical churches, there is a high view of preaching sourced from a high view of the Bible. While there may not be a lot of time devoted to the public reading of scripture, a substantial amount of time is given to preaching. The result is a two-part form of worship service – congregational singing and preaching (with announcements making up a functional third part). One-half of the service made up of announcements and singing and one half is comprised of preaching. The inclusion of other forms of worship may be seen as an addition that requires something to be reduced. What will give way? The preaching is considered too important, and the time required by the preacher is sacrosanct. To take away time from the musical part of the service is seen as a subtraction of worship; a problem when music and worship are synonymous. The addition of another form in the worship service begs the question of where it would be placed. What part of the service will have less time scheduled to allow time for the new item? Is the challenge then one of service time? Do leaders give up worship time, or do they give up preaching time? Expressed in this way, neither question appears to be an option and an impasse ensues, ceasing dialogue on adding or using other forms.

Another challenge can be unfamiliarity with other forms of worship. Time, introduction, guidance, and practice are required. Coupled with this is the association certain forms of worship have with specific denominations. A comment might be made that using candles would seem “too [Roman] Catholic.” The answer might be that Catholics do not have “dibs” on candles. There are some denominations that will be quite hesitant to use worship forms that are not considered normative. Anything that appears to be connected with a different denomination may not be easily accepted.

Challenging as well is the answer to this question: What is the purpose or role of the worship service in the context of the ministry of the church? Is it evangelism? Is it worship? Is it both? How is it both? The various answers to these questions since the 1980s have precipitated different foci for the worship planner. The place where leaders find themselves today, specifically in the Free Church tradition, is a myriad of directions resulting in the two-part worship structure.

How can these challenges be addressed? Time and generosity are key aspects. This conversation with church leaders typically begins with the question, “Are you in a hurry to make changes?” If patience is a virtue in introducing forms of worship, a generous timeline brings a way forward for congregants to follow along. A theme of generosity plants a way for inclusion to grow. Changes to forms of worship can cause disequilibrium for some congregants. Not being in a hurry and being gracious in progress will be beneficial.

The Proposed Art Forms

The reading of scripture is an obvious beginning. Some may push back, saying that scripture is always used in the service. If the connection is solely with the sermon, then there may still be room to expand its presence. While there are some mainline denominations that use a lectionary, there are examples of Free Church denominations incorporating the scheduled reading of scripture in their services. One church provides lay people with the opportunity to be involved in this part of the service. Each week, the pastor selects the passage of scripture from the lectionary and then writes a brief introduction explaining the context of the passage and what the congregation was about to hear. The introduction informs the congregant and encourages a closer listening to the selected scripture passage.

Excellent guidelines exist to help the reader of scripture to read aloud better. Articulating well the words of scripture and reading to the congregation on behalf of the congregation are vital tasks. Perhaps there are members of the congregation who have a drama or theatre background who would help train and coach scripture readers. Perhaps there are some readers who need to move beyond their perception of not needing help and encouraging them to do so is a worthy pursuit. One idea is to begin (or gather) a group for scripture readers. This group could then learn public reading skills and practice in front of one another, encouraging one another to develop their skills.

Dramatized Bibles organize scripture readings as dramas that can be memorized or presented as a Reader’s Theatre. Such presentations require thought as to placement in the worship service and some stage design to emphasize the scripture presented, rather than waiting for everyone to get in place. Time and effort in planning, practicing, and presenting result in a reading of scripture which everyone can easily listen and hear. Consequently, mic-ing and stage design are prime considerations.

Silence is rare in peoples’ lives. Not only are their lives busy, but the accompanying “soundtrack” that marks their days is relentless. There are some in the congregation who may be averse to silence. In many worship services, there is a musical underscore or synth pad filling moments, which means there is no silence.

To include silence in services may be the only silence the congregants experience in their week. Silence is associated with listening to God. If we are always talking or making noise, how will God's voice be heard? One church begins each of its services with silence. Once announcements are given, there is a call to worship and then a brief period of silence for the congregants to prepare for participating in the worship service. After the brief silence, a gentle music interlude indicates the ending of the period of silence and the beginning of the worship service. If silence is unfamiliar to your congregation, begin with brief periods of silence. A good idea is to provide a prompt for people to "do" something. Connected with a time of prayer, a time of silence can be a time for the congregants to bring their individual needs before God. One minister, to introduce silence into the service, began with a brief moment that he had determined ahead of time and used a watch to make sure all the time, and not less or more, was used. The temptation will be to end a period of silence too soon, as it seems to be lasting a long time. This is why a watch or phone to keep track of the amount is important. It keeps the leader on track and forces her to use the entire predetermined time. Starting out with fifteen or twenty seconds is a good beginning. More is not necessarily better. And leaders may want to begin counting the time once the congregation has settled into silence, which may take a moment or two.

Music has a variety of styles and is used for many purposes and the same is true of dance. One main difference is that music, through its lyrical content, most always easily demonstrates whether it is appropriate for Christian worship. The case for dance is more convoluted. Most congregants engage with music through their life experiences on a weekly basis, and many on a daily basis. The same is not true of dance. Dance, by its very nature and characteristics, is personal and demonstrative. The same characteristics are true for participation in music. While many people might indicate a negative answer when asked if they can dance, when the same people are asked to join a song, they often will participate.

Gesture and movement are part of people's everyday lives; however, in many churches, the only movement requested and participated in is standing and sitting. A step to move toward dance in the worship service, beyond the individual dance that may be taking place somewhere in the church sanctuary, is to begin with gesture and procession. Gesture, such as at a time of prayer when congregants are seated, is to ask them to place open palms up on their knees as a way of receiving from God. The gesture, in association with an act of worship, in this instance prayer, draws the connection of gesture/worship act for the worshipper. Other gestures can be used, such as lifting hands in praise to God for a particular part of a prayer or song. Having worshipers come forward to receive communion is movement. Another method is to use processions. Processions are very familiar in some churches, while in other congregations, processions would be new. This would be another instance when

someone may associate the worship activity, procession, with another particular denomination. The worship leader and/or leadership of the church, with patience, tact, and grace, can explain the purpose of the act.

Visual art is more easily accessible today than it has ever been. Many, if not most, churches have a video projector used to project song lyrics, announcements, scripture passages, and sermon notes or points. What is the strategy for selecting backgrounds for content or finding or producing content? Is it finding what is easily available? Is it locating something that corresponds to what is taking place in the worship service? Who makes the decision? Is it someone who is part of planning the worship service or worship series, or is it someone who has been sent the service content and then they decide what the projected content should be? The opportunity to make a visual impact is present and can contribute to serving the acts of worship. The visuals should enhance the spirit of the music. I attended a service where the background for all the song lyrics was photographs from the Hubble Space Telescope. While the backgrounds were beautiful, the songs spoke about the intimacy and closeness of God to humankind. The disconnect was evident.

There are many opportunities to think visually. What does the worship space look like? What is telling the people who enter what the purpose of the space is? What would assist the worshiper entering the space to come in as a member of the worshipping community and be prepared to participate in worship? The answer to these questions will depend on the space the church is using. Considering these questions and developing thorough answers will assist the worship planning team to develop a holistic process in planning each worship service.

Planning a Way Forward

When adding additional worship forms or art forms in the worship service, what should be the strategy or approach? A primary consideration is to think about the difference between role and function. In her book *The Music Architect*, Dr. Constance Cherry explains and explores music's role and functions. This distinction is a helpful way to consider other arts forms and how to use them. Cherry explains that music has one role and many functions. The primary role of music, as she describes it, "...is to facilitate the proclamation and celebration of God's story."⁶ She explains, "Music...is placed in service to worship, not the other way around; worship doesn't exist as a platform for musical engagement but to facilitate worship in fulfilling its God-given purpose: proclaiming and celebrating God's eternal narrative."⁷ The role of music, then, is to serve the purpose of worship in the church service. Music is not intended to solely set the mood or tone, to connect us with one

⁶ Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 39,

⁷ Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 39.

another, or to play any other singular role. Cherry continues, “...worship is the primary event and that music helps to enable it to be the glorious occasion that it is.”⁸ To belabor the point, note that music is not worship, not equated with worship, but is present to achieve the purpose of worship, which is centred on God’s work of reconciliation, redemption, and restoration.

Cherry then moves to explain how music functions. For the sake of brevity, these functions are simply listed here: music accompanies the actions of worship, music accommodates the dialogue of worship, and music accomplishes the communal ministry of worship.”¹ Note the action of music in its functions: accompanies, accommodates, and accomplishes. The function of music is not equated to worship but assists the activity in facilitating worship.

This is a helpful model when thinking about worship forms or art forms and their place in the worship service. Like music, other art forms are “...to facilitate the proclamation of celebration of the story of God.”⁹ Previously, the actions of worship were described as “praising, lamenting, confessing, thanking, being convicted, being inspired, being comforted.”¹⁰ When considering the actions of worship and how art forms can assist in expressing those actions, there is the beginning of a methodology in expanding the arts. Music can hold a lot of the weight of responsibility in a worship service. But should it always carry the entire weight of duty? Maintaining one role, assisting in telling and rejoicing in the story of God, and having multiple functions, the actions of worship, the dialogue of worship, and the ministry of worship, the purpose and use of art forms in worship are built and established on a firm foundation of purpose and intention.

Balance over time is a useful mindset to consider. In any one service, there may be more weight placed on a certain song style or perhaps something usually included is omitted in favour of trying something new. Not every worship service has to be balanced in all elements all of the time. Over time, new things and familiar things should be balanced. The idea of balance of over time also counters being in a hurry. Sometimes, worship leaders can seem hurried in wanting to make and see changes. If hurriedness is not a consideration, there is an opportunity to plant the seed for change, to water it, and wait for growth.

One additional idea on when to add new forms of worship or art is around the main seasons of the Church Year, such as Advent, Christmas, Lent, and/or Easter. It is often at these times that not only are congregants more accepting of something new but also expect to see or hear something new, or participate more freely in something new. Opportunities such as these are excellent times to introduce a new form of worship that can be done later in a weekly service of worship.

⁸ Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 40.

⁹ Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 39,

¹⁰ Witvliet, *How Can Art Serve?*, 55.

A Prototype Example

One example of increasing the use of the arts at a specific time of the Christian calendar I led and experienced. The season of the Christian year was Easter and the events described came after four to five years of trialing the services with a smaller group of people. This is one way of introducing art forms by having a small group, a worship team or choir involved in experiencing the art forms or worship forms. The benefits are two-fold in significant ways. One benefit is that the planner has the opportunity to do “test runs” in an actual setting. I was able to explain more of what was going to take place. The second benefit is that the group of people might be more favourable to what they are participating in since there is a closer relationship between the planner/developer and the participants. Being able to explain more of what is going to take place, coupled with doing it among people one is already in a relationship with, is a place for positive growth, feedback, and development. I had the opportunity to develop the form of worship while receiving feedback, and this response was helpful in gauging perception. Growth in the work of planning and leading different art forms/worship forms took place over time as opportunities occurred, as in this example, Easter.

After approximately five years of leading the Easter services for a small portion of the church (primarily the choir and their family members), the opportunity to lead the services for the entire church was made available. The overarching idea was to tell the Easter story with the following description: “One story told in three parts.” There would be a Maundy Thursday service, a Good Friday service, and Easter Sunday services. Maundy Thursday is a service based around communion. It recalls the night of the Passover meal Jesus had with his disciples. The scripture used recounts that meal and emphasizes the new commandment of loving one another. Good Friday is centred on the crucifixion. The scripture passages used for this service are often the seven last words of Christ. Easter Sunday is focused on the resurrection of Jesus, and this is a celebration of victory over death and the provision of life made for all humankind by Jesus.

The idea was to use a cross as the focal point for all three services. A massive cross, made of heavy, rough timber was made. The cross was used in three different ways in the three services.

For Maundy Thursday, the pews were removed from the centre of the seating area and the cross was placed on iron scaffolding so that the cross lay parallel to the floor at waist height. Chairs were brought in for seating around the cross. All instrumentalists, singers, and service leaders were on the main floor of the seating area. The platform/stage of the church was not used. This was to reinforce the shared commonality as we come to Christ and to accent this commonality in our

love for one another. Communion elements were placed on the cross, and when communion was served, congregants came to the cross to receive. The visual setting of the cross in the centre and among the congregants' worship space was a reminder of what brings the congregation together and what is the centre of the Christian life and walk.

For the Good Friday service, the singers, instrumentalists, and service leaders were all on the church platform, dressed in black when the service began. The cross was centred at the front edge of the platform, rising tall into the air. The placement of the cross meant that it was visually in the way of congregants for viewing what was taking place in the service. This placement was intentional. One of the ideas in planning the service was to make it difficult to ignore the cross and maybe even consider that it was "in the way." As the service progressed, when anyone had completed the portion of the service for which they were responsible, they exited the platform. At the end of the service, the only individual remaining on the platform was a cellist who ended the service by playing "O Sacred Head Now Wounded." At the close of the song, the service ended in silence with the opening of the doors to the lobby area. No words were spoken indicating the service was over. There was simply silence. No auditorium lights were brought up. Any light in the worship space came from the sunlight coming in from the lobby. Slowly and quietly, the congregation exited the church auditorium.

For Easter Sunday, the cross was moved from the edge of the platform and placed more upstage. The cross was draped with purple and white cloths with lilies placed at the base of the cross. For this service, there was full light, and there was no exit by service leadership. Everyone remained on the platform for the entirety of the service. Praise, celebration, and thanksgiving were the themes of the service.

For this congregation, the services with the major differences from the ordinary or usual were the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. Note the continuity of the same cross for each of the three services. Its placement and use in each service held a different theme. Those attending the services encountered the cross in a different way. On Thursday, the cross was among those gathered and provided the focal point of commonality. For Friday, the service the cross was in the way. It was also front and centre, and alone. The cross was something to be encountered in an aggressive and maybe disturbing way. Sunday, the cross was a point of celebration and rejoicing. What was difficult to encounter on Friday was now easily approachable with the call for humankind to come. One object used in three different ways helped emphasize the plan, the intention, and the themes of each service.

Forms used in the services: physical - everyone on the same level for the Thursday service; movement - come forward to obtain the communion elements; taste and touch - generous portions of bread and juice for communion; visual -

everyone dressed in black on Good Friday, leaving the platform, lessening of light; silence – ending of the Good Friday service; scripture – the lectionary readings for Good Friday; visual – Sunday service with full light and colour ;and sound – rejoicing and praise on Sunday.

This example is to demonstrate that change in using different art forms and expansion in using more worship forms is possible for a congregation. One vital consideration is to begin from who the church is. It may be an obvious statement, but anyone can encourage change from where they are. Worship leaders influence who the church is as they lead and serve together. There is no need to be in a hurry. The above example came after many years of doing similar services with a much smaller group of people. It provided time to build knowledge among people who were not familiar with different worship forms. It provided time for this author to learn better ways of integrating art forms and worship forms in these services. Take time to build trust; trust cannot be hurried and is imperative for worship leadership. Encourage people to join in the development of using different worship forms.

Conclusion

With the amazing regularity of planning and leading a weekly service of worship, it is easy not to have time for thinking about or explaining new forms of worship. With scheduling people to be involved in services, it can be simple not to have the opportunity to discover and practice with people who have artistic skills not normally used in the worship service. The first step to using forms of worship not usually used is to plan for the seasons of the Church Year that “require” additional art forms or worship forms. Any church can begin from where they are and work toward change. If ideas are needed, visit other churches and denominations and observe what they do. Then consider how what is observed should be reinterpreted for the congregation where you are a worship leader. Increasing other forms of worship and using other art forms requires time and consideration. After realizing one must begin where they are, consider what form of worship or artistic skill will be first. Begin and plan for careful changes and depend on God for growth.

Slow growth over time is something to consider as a process and as an agreeable timeline. There is no need to be in a hurry to make changes. However, making a change to see growth in worship expression is a worthy pursuit. Select the one art form that would be the most acceptable one for your congregation to experience and begin with that one. Acceptance comes with trust so proceed at a trustworthy pace but be committed to moving forward. There are art forms that have the functional ability to facilitate worship expression. These forms provide “colour” to how the congregation worships. There is an opportunity for worshipers to grow in their expressiveness. The work of the worship leader/pastor is challenging and joyful,

persistent and hopeful, pressed for time and timeless. Discover the joy and beauty that can be introduced and opened for the congregation.

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